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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who views the individual and society as contributors to a dynamic, ambiguous process, is applicable to educational philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's concern with free men and their relationship to the world centers on his concept of self, others, intersubjectivity, and morality. The self's contact with the social represents the origin of truth; persons discover themselves only in the social milieu where subjectivity and objectivity meet. Intersubjectivity refers to the impenetrable private world inhabited by everyone. Although unique to the individual, intersubjectivity creates a unity in which individual dreams are forged into a common goal, e.g., freedom. Merleau-Ponty suggests that change occurs only through institutional structures, that morality stems from respect for others, and that virtue is an affirmation of a universal bond among all human beings. From his perspective, education would combine groups with diverse viewpoints in school-inspired activities which focus on communication. While encouraging change through institutions, educators would alert learners to the threat of bureaucracy to the creative mind. Moral education would focus on the dilemmas of the human condition with the concern of extending justice to all, especially the weak and disadvantaged. (KC)

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PRIVATISM AND PLURALISM: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION FROM SELECTED ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF MERLEAU-PONTY

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Nashville, TN, November 4, 1982).

Spons 412

Pluralism in opposition with unity and privatism contending with fraternalism are conflicting themes in society and education. Philosophers and educators disagree on the state of society and its cure. Nozick[1] and Rawls[2] present disparate philosophic views on society. Butts[3] and Katz[4] outline opposing educational interpretations. Merleau-Ponty presents a view in which the individual and society are regarded not as opponents but as contributors to a dynamic, if ambiguous, process. He has been characterized as one who seeks to bring opposing points of view into dialogue and genuine confrontation with one another.[5]

Selfish privatism and fractionalizing pluralism rend the social fabric, isolate the individual, and create a vacuum of purpose in education. This paper will consider some elements in Merleau-Ponty's rich field of thought in relation to the current malaise and will explore some implications it may hold for education.

His view of self, others, intersubjectivity, and morality exemplify his view of mankind. His philosophy has been described as one concerned with free men and their interrelationships with themselves and the world.[6] It is a sober but

hopeful view of mankind.

Interrogator to the world, Merleau-Ponty has described the philosopher as one aware of his responsibility to awaken the community to its true function and in the process recognize the absolute relation which binds him to others.[7] His views could prove helpful to American educators who face the challenge of a divided and divisive society and of individualism which often degenerates into me-firstism.

The Self

Initially, one begins with the self, the individual, unique but never separated from the world. "I am given. . . already situated and involved in a physical and social world."[8] Rabil describes Merleau-Ponty's thought:

> The two poles of his thought are therefore 'self' and 'world.' It is the clarification of the self to itself and to others at which his method and his description aim; but it is the structure surrounding the self which makes self-understanding a possibility.[9]

The self's contact with the social is "revealed to me as the point of origin of all truth."[10] Rabil points out the dialectical tension of the "existentialist preoccupation with the self-understanding and the social orientation of the politically minded and the reformer,"[11] in his thought. The

self cannot forget its grounding in the world. In the education of the individual, assertiveness training and success-orientation need balancing with social awareness and political astuteness.

The dialectic of self and society are caught in Merleau-Ponty's words,

> . . .which makes the social fact (no matter how singular the local or temporal conditions) always appear to us a variant of a single life that ours is also part of, and makes every other person another ourself. . .[12]

Relating to education and phenomenological concerns, Collins argues for an educatien which recognizes the need to involve learners in the three levels of reality--the personal, the dialogic, and the institutional.[13]

The person discovers himself/herself in the social milieu where subjectivity and objectivity meet. Citing Merleau-Ponty:

> From the moment I recognize that my experience, precisely insofar as it is my own, makes me accessible to what is not myself. . .I am nothing but an ability to echo them. My life seems absolutely individual, absolutely universal to me.[14]

Mallin refers to the individual,

> If his existence is predominantly authentic, his mode of life will to that extent take part in the creative organization and specification of his society. . . . On the other hand, if his existence is predominantly inauthentic, he will to that extent be imprisoned by his acquired social structures and thus only confirm, and be dominated by the patterns that others are developing in his society.[15]

Education of the individual would encourage dynamic self belief which propelled the person into a life of challenge and of reward. In Landscapes of Learning, Greene describes the all too common reaction of the individual who escapes into himself:

> To take refuge within one's inwardness may well be to disarm oneself as a social being, to render oneself doubly vulnerable to the mystifications that legitimate manipulation and conditioning. Under such circumstances can the self remain inviolable?[16]

The education of the self must relate to the spheres of others and of the world if it is to be complete.

Other, Others

The self and the other structure and determine the world. In the process, each discovers more of himself or herself and the other. The other, "a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions,"[17] becomes a partner in an existence which requires sharing to be complete and fulfilling.

In the diadic relation of self and the other, the individual communicates with a speaking subject, a certain style of being. According to Mallin, "the other permeates not only my present field but my entire world."[18] Cool detachment and mechanical efficiency have no place in his social world. Rationality and emotions both have a part to play in an education operating from the perspective of a common world and a shared dream of progress. Referring to "Education and the American Dream," Greene suggested:

> Only a free and critical consciousness is capable of a true dream; only an authentic and reflective partisanship gives rise to passion; only passion can sustain such a dream.[19]

Eschewing a selfish privatism, the subject plunges into life, recognizes the need for others, and appreciates the community of humankind.

> The germ of universality. . .is to be found ahead of us in the dialogue into which our experience of

> other people throws us by means of a movement not all of whose sources are known to us.[20]

It is through dialogue that individuals recognize one another as co-partners in a swiftly changing world. Education can emphasize inter-group experiences with persons of differing ages, interests, and lifestyles creating situations rife with challenging communication opportunities.

Greene strikes a similar note in referring to education:

> It seems to me that any discussion of educational policy must take into account and begin with a determination to do what can be done to reconstitute a public space. . . . Such a reality cannot exist, however, unless individuals involved are able to make the kinds of judgments that transcend personal subjectivity. . . . persons with the capacity to look through the perspectives of those around them and of those likely to be affected by what they say or do.[21]

Such an education would seek to awaken students and society to the world of others whether it be the ghetto, the poverty of Appalachia, or the despair of the reservation.

The individual does not forsake his/her freedom or sense of uniqueness but nonetheless requires others for fulfillment. "No one by himself is subject nor is he free, that freedoms interfere with and require one another."[22]

There must be a continua dialectic between the one and the many, educationally and socially.

Intersubjectivity

Unity is found in intersubjectivity. Rabil finds the theme of unity in multiplicity in Merleau-Ponty's work:

> It is always both present and on the way. It is that on the basis of which life altogether is possible--a common visible world. But its presence is at the same time an absence since we can never be wholly present to one another--we each inhabit an invisible world of our own making. Thus there is 'unity' of human life without a 'synthesis'. The multiplicity of perspectives must be respected.[23]

A cultural order, multi-perspective in scope can support an authentic intersubjectivity. It is a pluralism in which each group and sector in society retains its pride in its domain but responds with equal fervor to a common call to loyalty. Civic education would assume both responsibilities in a pluralistic yet single society.

> We will arrive at the universal not by abandoning our particularity but by turning it into a way of reaching others. . .[24]

Multicultural education would prosper from contributions from each group's cultural background and in their shared support of a common democratic heritage. Vandenberg in describing education and the American Dream calls for multi-perspectivism:

> For this, the various perspectives have to be supported each alike, for the resultant perspectivalism encourages believing in the American Dream with the passion necessary to sustain the Dream as a dream, but in accordance with one's own light. The existence of various perspectives is the necessary result of plural critical consciousness. . . .[25]

Education would benefit from each group's unique view of the American Dream and would work to include all in sharing its benefits.

Joined with others, subjects coexist and participate in the common experience of the human condition.

> Ultimately our situation is what links us to the whole of human experience, no less than what separates us from it.[26]

Man's social situation is never clear cut nor completely logical. Ambiguity is part of one's existence and the shared experience with others. Past events and present circumstances are an intriguing mix of the enigmatic and the

obvious. Gay, in commenting on Merleau-Ponty, speaks of the "inherent ambiguity of life. . .we operate within an unavoidable range of ambiguity."[27] Acceptance of the ambiguous, the lack of a clear cut plan and a ready set of answers, is a difficult lesson to teach or to learn in a school or culture habituated to the ready solution and no-fail plan. History, art, and the autobiographical approach can help to convey the inherent ambiguity in all our lives.

Man's ambiguous position in history and in society is one which requires others to reduce some of the puzzlement, to clarify some of the doubts, and to highlight the visible in relationships with one another. But no promise is given of a final answer, a perfect world, or of complete understanding. Humans need one another to create a shared interworld. We originate meanings, but as Morris held, "Human responses to the human condition do not always come in disciplined propositional form. . . ."[28] An education of dialogue--one that encompasses the pre-reflective and the reflective as well as the public and the private--is required for the task.

Merleau-Ponty envisions a community of selves each independent and unique, but, at the same time, needing others and requiring their presence.

> Society for man is not an accident he suffers but a dimension of his being. He is not in society as an object in a box, rather he assumes it by what

is immanent in him.[29]

The institutional structure is significant in the life of the group and the individual. The subject is faced with a continuing dilemma between institutional pressures and individual freedom. Rabil's study suggests that despite the possibility of compromise, the individual must support institutions. To abandon institutions ". . .is at the same time to abandon a philosophy based on the present, since changes come about only through institutional structures."[30] A continual alertness to the possibility of rigidification and compromise is needed. The problem of the critical analysis of society along with the recognition of the stabilizing force of institutions can be explored in history, civics, and social sciences.

An education combining both critical consciousness and respect for structure is needed if society is to continue but innovation is to be encouraged. Greene's pedagogy would promote wideawakeness and <u>praxis</u> creating "conditions in the classroom for. . .genuine reflection upon action and reality."[31] Freedom is essential if bureaucratic mindlessness is to be restrained and creative, critical thought encouraged.

In Merleau-Ponty's social view, freedom is both a burden and a right. The life of freedom is interconnected with and dependent on others.

> Freedoms interfere with and require one another, that history is the history of their dispute, which is inscribed and visible in institutions, in civilizations, and in the wake of important historical actions. . .[32]

It is a freedom of the morally committed.

It involves not only the subject's taking a stand in regard to his/her goals but also the recognition of coexistence and mutuality. The self and others create a world whose structure organizes, limits, and presents opportunities to humankind. The leit motif of life is intersubjectivity in which neither the individual is obscured nor the social order threatened by separate interests. It encompasses a committed freedom of humans operating and acting in a world where involvement not privatism is a central force. Rising above narrow self-interest and parochial group claims, education can encourage involvement in issues which include and even threaten our common world whether they be economic, social, or governmental policy. Freedom is a shared right and responsibility of each individual.

It is a freedom in which the revolutionary, according to Rabil, is not one interested in overturning institutions. Social control is required.

> A genuine revolutionary is one who faces his own situation critically. . . . It follows that there

> is no reason why a revolutionary in our time should mean one who believes in overturning institutions. In fact, some type of parliamentary framework is necessary inasmuch as we cannot afford to sacrifice freedom any more than we can afford to sacrifice order.[33]

Education would promote revolutionaries who would work for freedom within institutions rather than against them.

Maxine Greene responds in a similar vein.

> My concern is for empowering people in such a way that they can attend to their situations in their concreteness. . . . But I see persons coming together in this effort and shaping their projects in relation to one another. I see them confronting the facticity of institutions as the source of domination or unfreedom, but also as the potential source of situated social freedom.[34]

Essentially a moral view of humanity is proposed for education.

Morality

Merleau-Ponty's view of society considers morality as stemming from respect for others and virtue as an affirmation of a universal common bond between all men. Spurling

describes the existentialist ethic.

> An existentialist ethic will not avoid conflict or even injustice, since there are no guarantees or certainties in action, and because nothing is won without cost. . . . Nothing in man is pure. If it is true 'that hell is other people' (Sartre), it is no less true that they are our salvation.[35]

Accepting a clear-eyed view of oneself, society, and the world, one can work to extend a more human life for all in a continually changing situation.

> True morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective value. There are no ways to <u>be</u> just or to <u>be</u> saved. . . . It consists of actively being what we are by chance, of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves for which our temporal structure gives us the opportunity and of which our liberty is only the rough outline.[36]

From this perspective, moral education would relate to life as lived. Neither opportunism nor apathy would be considered legitimate options. Groups and individuals structure values in a committed response to a community of equals.

Merleau-Ponty's social stand demands that the individual plunge into life, affirm his bond with others, and assume

responsibility for his/her actions. A person of thought and action, the subject would contend:

> Principles are mystifications unless they are put into practice; it is necessary that they animate our relations with others. Thus we cannot remain indifferent to the aspect in which our acts appear to others, and. . .the perceptions of the other founds morality by realizing the paradox of an alter ego, of a common situation.[37]

The other I includes friend, neighbor, and stranger. It is an intersubjective awareness. The other's suffering becomes that of the subject. Encompassing others, education becomes universal. It is education for justice. In Rabil's interpretation:

> . . .the task of ethics is to make our always unacceptable world less unacceptable; that one way to do this is to support programs offering greater justice for those who are oppressed and that in serving the cause of the oppressed one serves the best interests of the social order as a whole.[38]

The ethics of education would, if influenced by Merleau-Ponty, support programs devoted to enriching the life of the disadvantaged and increasing their opportunities to adequately meet the challenge of today's complex world. It

would be an education which encouraged educators to recognize the pain and conflict in the world, but also to remain hopeful and confident in the abilities and aspirations of humans to solve problems, overcome barriers, and remain loyal to the ideals of individual autonomy and group cohesiveness. Selfishness and divisiveness are recognized but so too is hope.

> But underneath the clamor a silence is growing, an expectation. Why could it not be hope?[39]

Summary

Some educational implications can be drawn concerning a philosophy which celebrates the individual and esteems the group. Self-awareness is dynamically balanced with social responsibility. In a dialogic relationship which combines rationality and emotions, groups representing a potpourri of viewpoints can, in school inspired activities, embark on the difficult but stimulating enterprise of communication in which people really listen to one another. A society in dialogue can pursue the American Dream with a mature acceptance of the ambiguous elements in all our projects and master plans.

In pursuit of a better world, education will encourage change through institutions. While recognizing institutional stability as the best defense for freedom, creative thought,

and innovation, educators will alert learners continually to the danger of suffocation from institutional mind set. They could endeavor to provide pathways through the bureaucratic labyrinth of rules, procedures, and protocol, all threats to the creative and inquiring mind.

To achieve a society in which individuals and groups are concerned with and responsible to others, moral education would focus on the dilemmas of the human condition. Its aim would be to extend justice to all, particularly the weak and disadvantaged. It would be a humanistic education.

> But if by humanism we mean a philosophy which confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem. . . . (these are) some of the conditions of any serious humanism.[40]

Footnotes

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3. R. Freeman Butts, The Revival of Civic Learning: A Rationale for Citizenship Education in American Schools (Phi Delta Kappa, 1980).

4. Michael Katz, Class, Bureaucracy and Schools, expanded ed. (New York: Praeger, 1975); idem, "Reflections on the Purpose of Educational Reform," Educational Theory 30 (1980):77-87.

5. Albert Rabil, Jr., Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist of the Social World (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 117.

6. Ibid., pp. 85, 86.

7. Ibid., p. 177.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 360.

9. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, p. viii.

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signs, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 109.

11. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, p. viii.

12. Merleau-Ponty, Signs, p. 112.

13. Clinton Collins, "The Multiple Realities of Schooling," in Existentialism and Phenomenology in Education, ed. David E. Denton (New York: Teachers College Press, 1974), pp. 141-142.

14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 94.

15. Samuel B. Mallin, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 270.

16. Maxine Greene, Landscapes of Learning (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), p. 14.

17. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 354.

18. Mallin, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy, p. 254.

19. Maxine Greene, "A Response to 'Education and the American Dream'" in Philosophy of Education 1975: Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, ed. Richard Pratte (San Jose, California: Studies in Philosophy and Education, 1975), p. 314.

20. Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, p. xv.

21. Greene, Landscapes of Learning, p. 89.

22. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 205.

23. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, p. 163.

24. Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, p. 92.

25. Donald Vandenburg, "Education and the American

Dream," in Philosophy of Education 1975, p. 310.

26. Merleau-Ponty, Signs, p. 110.

27. William C. Gay, "Merleau-Ponty on Language and Social Science: The Dialectic of Phenomenology and Structuralism," Man and the World 12 (1979):337.

28. Van Cleve Morris, "Living Without Bridges," in Philosophy of Education 1980: Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, ed. C. J. B. Macmillan (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1980), p. 21.

29. Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, pp. 128, 129.

30. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, p. 256.

31. Greene, "A Response to 'Education and the American Dream,'" pp. 317, 318.

32. Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, p. 205.

33. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, p. 114.

34. Maxine Greene, "Response to Troutner," in Philosophy of Education 1980, p. 75.

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36. Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, p. 40.

37. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 126.

38. Rabil, Merleau-Ponty, pp. 250, 251.

39. Merleau-Ponty, Signs, p. 23.

40. Ibid., p. 223.